

THE FIRE JEWELS OF VENUS

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CHAPTER 1

It was a hot day. But then, pretty much every day in the Venusian equatorial region was hot, so Hank Allard was used to it. He'd arrived from Earth 16 years ago and hadn't been off-planet since.

Though he did sometimes find himself missing the coolness of a New England September, he had no deep desire to go back to Earth. His life was here, commanding his steam-powered ship, making cargo runs back and forth between the six small city states that formed the Crimson Ocean Trade Federation. Hank loved his ship—the 60-foot-long *Mark Twain*—and he loved being behind her wheel as she plowed through the sea.

But now one of his crew was trying to make life more difficult for him.

He sat with Destiny Williams and Nom Proo—his blue-skinned Neptunian engineer—in the *Twain's* small mess hall. The Martian twins stood nearby, stooping to fit their seven foot tall bodies into the cabin and listening with interest as Destiny argued her point.

“Even after 3000 years,” she said, “the major landmarks line up pretty accurately with our modern maps. It's for real, boss. I know it is.”

Hank sighed and looked down at the ancient map that lay on the mess table. Etched into the skin of a Venusian tyrannosaur, it did indeed look like a portion of the Crimson Sea's southern coastline. Some differences were there, of course, but time and erosion would account for that.

“Destiny,” he said. “I don't dispute your expertise, but you don't have the equipment to properly date this map. You don't...” he started to directly say that she didn't work in the Archeology

department at Oxford anymore, but that was a very sore subject for her.

He tried again. "Destiny, the map is probably a fake. How often do myths turn out to be reality? When the ruins of Troy were discovered, no one found the remains of a big horse."

"There's evidence to support that the Fire Jewels exist," insisted Destiny. "I've studied the histories. The Chronicles of the Eighth Dynasty of the Miroasian Empire have several verified accounts of the Jewels being used in battle. And you know that descendants of Venusian royalty still show some minor telepathic abilities. That the Emperors were once able to focus those powers through the Jewels is very, very possible. I read a paper about an experiment at the Lunar Academy..."

"Okay, okay!" Hank sighed again. "So this map might point the way to an ancient temple containing priceless artifacts, but someone lost it in a poker game to you? Why would he have risked that?"

"He—I think it was a he--was a Mercurian Rock Person who didn't know its value, but heard I might want it. I don't know where he got it. You know the weird accents those guys have. I couldn't understand half of what he said." She shrugged.

"What were you holding?" asked Nom Proo. The Neptunian was an inveterate gambler.

"Three sixes. The Mercurian had two pair."

"That doesn't..." Hank started to snap at them, then stopped and suddenly smiled. Why was he arguing about a chance to sail some place new? He'd never been to the Southern Coast. Even if they just cruised around and ran away from plesiosaurs, it was always satisfying to be at sea.

He pointed to the map. "The dinosaurs are supposed to be pretty thick down there and there's no denying that it's a long shot that we'll find anything worthwhile. Who wants to go?"

Destiny actually raised her hand like a nerdy kid who knew the answer to the teacher's math problem. Nom Proo shrugged—an odd-looking gesture for a four-armed humanoid—and said “As long as you still pay my wages, I'll help point the ship where you tell me to.”

Hank looked over at the twins. One of them—Matti or Burlth, he still had occasional moments when he wasn't sure which was which—said “We have taken a Service Oath with you, Sir.”

“Well, that cargo of Farkle Spice paid pretty well. We'll need to stock up on rations and energy packs for the weapons. I'll do that while Nom checks over the engines. We should be able to leave in the morning.”

Destiny was smiling broadly. “It's not too much of a long shot, boss. There's a good chance the Jewels are there.”

“Just don't get too disappointed when we don't find anything, Destiny.”

CHAPTER 2

Two weeks passed and the ship was farther south in the Crimson Sea than Hank had ever sailed. Hank had been enjoying himself enormously, steering his ship over placid waters, with the red and blue colors of the jungle foliage that lined the shore providing a magnificent view. To his surprise and Destiny's delight, two of the landmarks indicated on the map had been found and they were about a day away from hopefully finding the third when trouble found them.

“Burlth, take the wheel,” ordered Hank.

“Yes, Sir.” The Martian replaced Hank at the helm and the human moved quickly out of the wheelhouse and jogged to the stern of the boat. Matti and Destiny were already there, with the woman staring through a pair of binoculars. Nom Proo was in the engine room, trying to coax a little extra speed out of the *Mark Twain*.

“Have we gained any on it?” asked Hank as he reached out for the binoculars.

“Nope,” replied Destiny. “In fact, I think it’s still gaining on us. Boss, take a look at its lower jaw.”

Hank raised the binoculars to his eyes and focused in on the plesiosaur that had been pursuing them for the last four hours and which was now less than 200 yards away. It was a big one—at least eighty feet long—and would be a real danger to the ship if it got close enough to attack. Venusian plesiosaurs were aggressive, omnivorous and had incredibly powerful jaws. Two years ago, Hank had been contracted to salvage a two-man research submarine that had been attacked by one of these guys. Several of the hull plates had actually been wrenched loose and decorated with teeth marks by the hungry ‘saurs. One of the monsters could potentially rip the *Mark Twain* apart.

Normally, the ship could outrun a ‘saur. But this one was *fast*.

The image in the binoculars came into clear view and Hank felt a jolt of surprise run through him. The plesiosaur’s lower jaw was made of metal! A moment later, Hank realized one of its eyes was artificial.

“One of its fins broke surface a minute ago,” said Destiny. “It was metal as well.”

“Ma’am,” asked Matti with typical Martian courtesy, “do you mean this creature is a robot?”

“Well, a cyborg, anyway,” replied Destiny. “It’s been enhanced with robotic prosthetics.”

She and Hank exchanged glances and both spoke the name at the same time: “Graloon the Dictator.”

Matti shrugged. “My apologies, but I don’t recognize the name.”

“He’s before your time, lad,” said Hank. He ignored the half-smile that appeared on Destiny’s lips. Hank was an amateur historian of his adopted planet and sometimes went into what she called

“Lecture Mode” when an historical topic came up. It was in Lecture Mode that he would get a bit avuncular in his speech patterns, referring to crewmembers as “lad” and “lass.”

“Graloon was a scientist who also had ambitions for world conquest. A century ago, he merged a number of the barbarian tribes and a few of the Lizard Man clans into a confederation of sorts, then reinforced them with cyborg dinosaurs and other creatures. He gained control over half the Southern Continent before he was defeated in a massive battle. He disappeared and his cyborg monsters were presumed to be destroyed. No one ever found his base or lab or whatever he was using to modify his pet monsters.”

“This guy must be a left-over,” said Destiny. “The big creatures can live a couple of hundred years.”

Hank nodded. “Our friend might be getting up in years, but he’s clearly not retired yet. Matti, break out the blaster pistols.”

“Sir, would they be effective against something that large?

“If we hit him often enough. He’s gaining on us slowly, so we should have enough time to pepper him pretty thoroughly.” Hank kept his voice confident, but he wasn’t at all sure the blasters would do enough damage to stop or discourage the creature.

“May I make a suggestion, Sir?”

“Okay.”

“When my brother and I were fighting in the Mons Olympus Civil War, we often had to improvise the weapons we needed. We learned a trick for making a powerful explosive using the power packs of blasters.”

“Powerful enough to stop that thing?”

“I think so. We have several dozen spare power packs. Five or six of those should work, Sir.”

Destiny shook her head. "How do we get the explosive to the monster?"

"Ma'am, I'm afraid we'll have to let it get extremely close before we can kill it."

CHAPTER 3

The Martian twins sat in the ship's small mess room, worked quickly, salvaging parts from the spare radio set to wire together six of the spare power packs into a single, compact unit. Nom Proo and Hank stood nearby and watched with intense interest. Destiny was at the helm, while the creature was now less than 100 yards away.

Burlth looked up. "All done, Sir."

"And you're sure this sling idea can work?"

"Yes, Sir. I once used a makeshift sling to fire one of these into the open turret of a tank."

Hank often had trouble thinking of the polite and soft-spoken twins as hardened combat veterans, but he knew they were. They had come to Venus as exiles and Hank had taken them in, teaching them the merchant sea-trade. They had learned quickly and, in gratitude to Hank for giving them a viable livelihood, had sworn a Service Oath to him. Hank did not pretend to understand the ins and outs of the complex Martian culture, but he knew that meant he had their complete loyalty. Because of this, he always tried to be careful not to take unfair advantage of them.

"I don't care for the idea of throwing you into the line of fire, Burlth. If this doesn't work, you'll be the first one down the monster's gullet."

"It will work, Sir. I promise you I won't miss."

Matti spliced in one last wire and Burlth lifted the explosive into a sort-of large sling made from a pair of suspenders taken from

Hank's last pair of dress pants. He hadn't worn them in years, anyways.

Except for Destiny at the helm, they all gathered at the stern of the ship. The creature was within 70 yards.

All of them now carried holstered blaster pistols, but, after some debate, Hank had agreed they would not open fire until the explosive had been used. The plesiosaur was closing in at a steady pace and holding its long neck relatively still, with its jaws opening every minute or two to emit a loud roar. Blaster fire might cause it to start moving more unpredictably and make Burlth's job that much harder.

The Martian took position directly at the stern, with the others standing back and giving him plenty of room. Between his seven-foot height and arms that were proportionally longer than a human's, Burlth needed plenty of room in which to spin the sling.

When the Martian was set, Hank yelled "Destiny! Reduce speed!"

The *Mark Twain* slowed perceptibly and the deck became a little steadier. The plesiosaur began to gain on them rapidly.

Burlth watched the creature closely. When it was less than 50 yards away, he snapped on the explosive's makeshift timer, set the device into the sling and began to slowly spin the sling in a counter-clockwise motion.

If he misses, Hank thought, the creature might be on him before we can fire. The Venusian seas were sometimes very dangerous, but Hank had never lost a crewmember and harbored a deep fear that this might someday happen.

The creature continued to close the gap between itself and the ship. Forty yards, then thirty. When it was about twenty-five yards away, Burlth began to spin the sling more rapidly. Seconds later, just as the plesiosaur let loose with a roar, he released the explosive.

It sailed in an arc away from the ship, catching the creature's eye as it approached. The creature snapped out at it, closing its jaws around it.

The muffled explosion was barely audible from the ship, but its results were clearly visible. The creature's head and lower neck blew apart in a shower of blood and flesh. Its metallic lower jaw flew forward and bounced off the Mark Twain's stern before falling into the sea. The rest of the creature collapsed into the sea and sank quickly, leaving a film of blood on the surface.

Hank was speechless for a moment, then managed to catch his breath and say "Burlth, that was incredible."

"Thank you, Sir," replied the Martian, sounding as casual as if Hank had just complimented him on a pair of new shoes.

"I wonder if there are any more cyborg creatures around," commented Nom Proo.

Hank shook his head. "They were supposedly all destroyed a hundred years ago. We ran across a forgotten survivor, but the odds have got to be against us running into any more."

CHAPTER 4

The landmarks used on the maps were ancient "Guide Towers," so-called because their original purpose had been lost to history and they were often used by mapmakers as reference points. Relics of the ancient First Empire, they were towers that stood about 10 meters tall, built from a Venusian alloy that had covered itself with thin coat of rust and minor corrosion after perhaps 30,000 years, but were still solid. Destiny's map used four of

these as marker points, which allowed the crew to account for often severe changes in the shape of the shore and the islands and still follow the route that supposedly led to the fire jewels. So far, they had found two of the towers.

Three days after the encounter with the plesiosaur, the *Mark Twain* was chugging slowly along the shore of a jungle-thick island about a mile off the main shore. Hank and Destiny stood at the bow, each of them examining a tall, steep hill that rose up about a mile from the island's shore."

"The island *may* have once been a peninsula," said Hank. "But I don't see a Guide Tower. Should be on top of that hill, shouldn't it?"

"It could be buried," commented Destiny. "A few towers have been found underground. At least one had fallen over when the ground around its base had eroded."

Hank studied the hill for another moment, then shrugged and lowered his binoculars. "Well, it's either the right spot or it's not. We'll have to take a look around the summit of the hill to make sure." He raised the binoculars to his eyes again. "There's a small inlet right over there. We can anchor and take a look ashore. MATTI!" His voice raised to a shout so that he would be heard in the wheelhouse. "Turn on the sonar and sound the bottom, then head for that inlet at about 30 degrees. See it?"

"Yes, Sir."

An hour later, they were at anchor and the ship's small lifeboat had been lowered into the water. Hank, Destiny, and the twins strapped on holsters containing blaster pistols and filled canteens from the ship's fresh water distiller. Hank and Destiny each carried a hand radio stuck in a pocket.

"That hill slopes up pretty steeply," said Hank. "I doubt a small island like this one can support carnivores, but keep an eye out just in case. There shouldn't be much danger in splitting up, so

Matti and I will head around the starboard side of the hill. Destiny and Burlth, you take the port side.”

They were ashore in another ten minutes, splitting up and heading into the jungle. The foliage was thick, but not as bad as some areas that Hank had encountered during his time on Venus. He and Matti made slow but steady progress. The jungle was full of life—Hank heard the buzzing of insects and the cheep-cheep-cheep of Venusian squirrel-frogs. But the insects bothered neither the human nor the Martian. Some of them were analogous to Earth mosquitoes, but they didn’t care for the taste or smell of non-Venusians. Hank listened for the roar of dinosaurs, but didn’t hear a thing.

In less than two hours, they were within sight of the hill. It was steep and would have been a difficult climb, but there was a narrow path nearby that was cut into the side of the hill and twisted upward towards the summit. The path had crumbled in a few places, but still looked usable.

“Looks man-made,” commented Hank.

“If there’s a tower here,” replied Matti, “perhaps it’s another remnant of the First Empire.”

“I doubt it. The towers are still around because of the alloy they’re made of. If this path was First Empire, it would have eroded away centuries ago.” He shrugged. “A path to the top for us, though. This is a walk in the park without any dinosaurs around.”

“Sir, I was just thinking we shouldn’t let our guards down. If this island is the peninsula shown on the map, then the gap between it and the shore—where the land bridge would have once been—might be shallow enough for the larger dinosaurs to wade across.”

Hank thought about this for a moment. “Well, crap. Matti, sometimes you are annoyingly smart.”

The Martian smiled. “Yes, Sir.”

“Well, we haven’t seen or heard anything so far. I doubt the dinos have cause to wade over here that often even if they can.”

Predictably, there was a roar from the jungle.

“Sir,” said Matti, “isn’t there an Earth saying about speaking too soon?”

“Now you’re just being annoying.” Hank took out his hand radio and thumbed the “Talk” button. “Destiny, you there?”

He was answered by static. Frowning, he tried again. Then he waited for a half-minute before trying a third time. In the meantime, the roar from the jungle sounded again. Hank recognized the roar as that of an allosaurus. And it was getting closer. The radio continued to blare nothing but static.

“Where is she?” he muttered. Shoving the radio back into his pocket, he told Matti: “We’ll head for the path. Let’s run.”

The two men sprinted across the fifty yards of clear terrain that separated them from the path up the hill. Halfway across the clearing, an allosaur burst from the jungle line about a hundred yards away from them. A cyborg eye glittered red from one of its sockets. Its lower jaws and both legs were metallic.

Hank and Matti ran faster.

CHAPTER 5

Hank and Matti ran along the ledge, with the sounds of the pursuing allosaur seeming to grow closer each second. To their right, the sheer cliff remained unclimbable even for a Martian hillman. To their left was a two hundred foot drop into the jungle.

Hank was cursing the Venusian heat now as his breath came in ragged gasps. He held his blaster pistol ready, but only a very

lucky shot would stop a large carnosaur in the few seconds he would have to make that shot. Still, there was no option other than to try. He began to slow down.

Matti glanced at him. "Keep going," Hank managed to say between breaths. "I'm going to take a shot at it."

Matti nodded, but didn't keep going. He stopped along with Hank, so that the two were standing beside a clump of bright red foliage growing at the base of the cliff. The Martian youth drew his own pistol.

"Keep going, Matti. That's an order."

The youth didn't reply or even look at his captain. He just stared back along the trail. The allosaur would appear around the last curve of the ledge at any moment.

"Don't forget your Service Oath, Matti," snapped Hank.

Matti smiled. "I am honoring that oath as best I can, Sir."

"Well, crap." Hank raised his pistol. "Go for the eyes as soon as we see it. I'll go for the biological eye. You aim for the cyborg eye."

"Whatever you say, Sir." Bizarrely, Hank found himself wishing the two Martians weren't so inveterately polite.

The allosaur seemed to have slowed up. Perhaps it had their scent and knew they had stopped. But they could still hear its approaching footsteps.

"Any second now," muttered Hank.

Just then, a metallic but pliable tentacle shot out of the foliage at lightning speed and wrapped itself around Matti's torso. In less than a second, the Martian was pulled into the foliage. The patch of plant life wasn't large enough to conceal a seven-foot tall humanoid, but Matti disappeared nonetheless.

At that moment, the allosaur appeared around the curve, its cyborg eye, arm and leg glinting in the bright sunlight. It roared and charged towards Hank.

Hank had been momentarily stunned by the surprise of Matti's disappearance, but the charging dinosaur snapped him back into alertness. He had no idea what just happened, but he played a hunch and dived headfirst into the foliage.

His shoulder scraped against the edge of a narrow and hidden cave entrance, but his body shot through and he found himself somersaulting along a dimly lit narrow corridor that slanted downwards at about 30 degrees. He dug his heels into the floor to stop his tumble and scrambled to his feet.

The corridor was illuminated by overhead lights, spaced about three feet apart but only about one out of every three working. The air smelled musty and the corridor, lined with rusty metal, had a long-abandoned feel to it. It stretched out before him, turning in a sharp curve about 30 feet ahead.

Matti was nowhere to be seen. Hank was about to move down the corridor and was considering shouting out when two humanoid robots, each standing about four feet tall, clomped into view from around the curve.

One of them raised an arm, at the end of which was attached a ray projector of an unknown design.

Its movement, though, was slow and jerky. Hank beat it to the shot, firing a blast into its chest. The robot fell backwards, sparking and smoking.

The second robot didn't seem to be equipped with a ray projector. A small door opened in its chest and Hank heard a sharp poof. A small dart struck him in the left shoulder.

Instantly, he felt dizzy and his knees began to buckle. But he leaned against the corridor wall and managed to keep his feet. Whatever the drug might be, it was probably design to work on Venusian physiology. The robot was moving towards him in jerky

steps. Hank rubbed his eyes with his left hand, raised the pistol in his right and tried to focus his blurring vision. The robot was perhaps ten feet away when the Earthman began firing. He missed twice, but his third shot severed the robot's head from its body.

Hank felt a wave of nausea and almost lost his lunch. He stood still for perhaps two minutes, eyes screwed shut, trying to remain conscious as his brain seemed to begin doing handstands inside his skull. His head began to ache sharply.

He breathed deeply and waited. Another two minutes passed and the worst of the dizziness and pain faded. He opened his eyes and began to walk unsteadily down the corridor. He had no idea where he was or who had built those robots, but he had a crewman to save.

CHAPTER 6

As he moved carefully forward, Hank whispered into the hand radio. "Destiny, come in. Nom Proo, how about you? You there?" Once again, the only reply was static. Destiny and Burlth could have also run into trouble, but Nom Proo *should* be safe on the ship. Hank was hoping that this facility—whatever it might be—was generating some sort of interference. He would prefer to rescue just one of his crew at a time.

The corridor turned gradually and sloped downward. Fewer of the overhead lights were working as he descended and the darkness thickened around him. He kept his blaster pistol ready. The nausea had faded completely and, though fearful about his crew, he felt ready to handle anything he might run into.

After walking perhaps two hundred yards, he saw a doorway framed in dim light ahead. He slowed his pace, taking care to make as little noise as possible. As he neared the door, he had a sudden thought, took the hand radio from his pocket and switched it off. Murphy's Law would dictate that someone would

finally answer his calls at the moment he didn't want to make any noise.

Nearing the door, he carefully peaked around the frame and nearly cursed aloud at what he saw.

It was a large dimly-lit chamber stretching back into the darkness, its ceiling also lost to the pitch black above. Hank had no immediate sense of how large it was. The chamber was full of a variety of electronic equipment and there was a row of hospital-style beds lined against a wall not far from the door. At least a score of robots lay deactivated, scattered about the chamber, but a half-dozen humanoid robots and three robotic velociraptors (complete robots—not cyborgs) were still active. Three of the humanoid robots stood near the beds. On three of those beds were strapped Destiny, Burlth and Matti. All three appeared to be unconscious.

Hank's eyes went wide as he took in more detail. The robots near the beds were laying out a variety of surgical instruments and several metallic body parts on small tables besides those beds. Hank was hit with the horrific realization that his crew were about to be turned into cyborgs. And, judging by the jerky, uncertain movements of the robots, the operations were not likely to be successful.

Graloon, thought Hank. This was his base. His robots are falling apart after a century without any proper maintenance, but they are still guarding the base and following programmed instructions as best they can.

He pulled his eyes away from the bed and forced himself to examine the chamber carefully. Gradually, he began to pick out some pattern to the layout, tracing power cables and soon identifying what he thought was the generator. Or at least the controls for the generator.

How much power did this place need in its heyday? After Graloon's death, this area was supposed to have been scanned

for signs of atomic energy in an effort to find his base, but that had proved futile. If not atomics, how did he power all this?

That was a question for another time. First things first. He had taken a course in robotics at college. That was a long time ago now and he had never followed up on that training, but he didn't *think* the design of the small robots allowed for an internal power source. That meant the chamber's generator was beaming them power. Shut that down and he would kill the robots.

He wished he knew what sort of sensors those robots were equipped with. Watching until it seemed that none of them were looking towards him, he slipped into the room and crouched behind a panel.

No alarm was sounded and none of the active robots reacted to him. Carefully stepping around a rusting robot parasauralophus head, he moved back into the shadows and took a circular route towards what he thought was the generator.

He moved around another panel and came face-to-face with a robot velociraptor. The raptor was in poor condition, with a chest plate hanging open and one forearm broken off at the elbow, but it was still active. Seeing Hank, it opened its mouth to roar.

The only sound that came out was a soft squeak. As the raptor crouched in what Hank assumed was a prequel to an attack, the human jumped on top of it.

Hank didn't want to risk too much noise by using his blaster. He let the weapon fall to the floor to free both hands as his weight bore the raptor to the floor. The raptor's legs jerked as it tried to reach him with its toe claws. Hank wrapped his left arm around its neck and, with his right hand, reached into the open chest panel and ripped out every wire he could grab hold of.

A shower of sparks flew from the chest panel and Hank gritted his teeth to suppress a shout of pain as he felt his hand burn. But the raptor stopped moving and the dim lights in its eyes went out.

Chapter 7

Hank rose to a crouch and snatched up his blaster with his left hand. He waited, but heard nothing other than the robots moving about the hospital beds.

After a minute, he was sure that none of the other robots were aware of the brief fight. He examined his right hand. The burns were slight and, after the initial shock, Hank realized the pain wasn't that bad. He shifted the blaster back into his right hand and continued towards the generator.

He reached it without further incident. Not knowing how long it would be before the robots began to cut away parts of his crew, he immediately went to work. Using the screwdriver attachment on his pocket knife, he removed a maintenance panel and looked inside.

Another surprise. The innards of the generator was wired to a trio of glowing red jewels, each about the size of an ostrich egg.

The Fire Jewels! Hank was guessing, but he was sure he was right. There couldn't be more than one set of jewels that matched the description from the legends. Apparently, they served a purpose other than amplifying telepathic powers. They were apparently providing power for Graloon's base. Perhaps the stories about enhanced telepathy were just literal legends.

The jewels glowed with power. Even after a century of use, they seemed to be going strong. Probably the obvious loss of power to much of the base was due to a lack of maintenance to the equipment rather than anything to do with the jewels.

Well, Destiny will be happy. It also makes it pretty easy to pull the plug. Hank reached forward and took hold of one of the jewels.

Instantly, he was somewhere else, floating in a formless, empty space. Facing him was the transparent form of a five-foot-tall

humanoid figure, marked as a Venusian by his green-hair and six-fingered hands.

Hank recognized him from old Tri-Dee images. *Graloon.*

You are a human. Hank heard the thoughts in his head. The language was an archaic form of Southern Venusian, but he could understand it.

Hank could not speak aloud and he began to realize that this was all happening inside his own head, so to speak. So he assumed that Graloon could read his thoughts. *Where am I?*

You have not moved physically. All will be clear soon. Human, I am Graloon, rightful emperor of Venus. I died what must now be many years ago, but I also still live. My life force is contained in the Fire Jewels.

Hank didn't react or reply. He was struggling to regain his mental bearings and had no idea how to get out of this. He assumed if he let go of the jewel, he'd break the connection with Graloon. But at the moment, he could not feel his own body or work his own muscles.

Human, you will provide me with a physical body. In return, I will reward you.

Hank needed a moment to allow that to sink in. *What body? Mine?*

No. I will not harm you. But if you follow my instructions, you can provide me with a mental conduit in which to move my life force into another body. I sense several nearby. A human and... two Martians? One of the Martians will do.

I will not allow you to harm my crew.

You are responsible for them? Very well, then. I will not force you to violate your current loyalties. It will take a few days longer, but I can use a conduit to form a body out of any nearby matter. One of the robots will do. It will be temporary, but once free of the Jewels, I can occupy a more permanent body at a later date.

Hank immediately thought *No!*

Do not reject me so readily, human. I can offer you much. There is a treasure buried nearby—rare ores worth a king's ransom. Spoils from my crusade to untie this planet. I can make you rich. I want to truly live again, to fulfil my destiny and rule this world. But whether I succeed or fail, you will be a rich man.

If Hank had been able to react physically, he would have laughed aloud.

Graloon, even if that's true—even if the treasure exists and if you didn't backstab me as soon as you were free—I wouldn't go for that offer. You see, I'm already a rich man. I have my own ship and I have the open seas on which to sail that ship. I have a crew—a family—that... well, that I love. I want nothing more from life than what I already have. So, no, I think I will pass on the opportunity to release a ruthless mad man to ravage my adopted world.

Human, you don't appreciate what you are refusing. The Diamonds of the Lizard Clans. The Scrolls of the First Empire. The Ruby Staff of...

By now, Hank was ignoring Graloon's rant. He was realizing that if he concentrated, he began to regain the feel of his body. He focused on his hand and concentrated on the muscles in his fingers. Finally, while Graloon continued to recite a long list of legendary treasures, Hank was able to force his hand to move and release his hold on the jewel.

Instantly, he was back in the chamber, crouched behind the generator. He needed a moment to regain his physical equilibrium, but then began to tear wiring away from the Fire Jewels while taking enormous care not to actually touch the Jewels again.

Chapter 8

“He actually mentioned the Scrolls of the First Empire?” Destiny’s voice rose to a near shout. “Boss, that would have been one of the most valuable historical finds in history!”

After the generator was shut down, the robots had collapsed and the rest of the lights in the chamber had gone out. Using his flashlight, Hank had found his way back to the beds. He discovered Destiny, Burlth and Matti already regaining consciousness. It had been electrical impulses from the bed that had been keeping them asleep.

Burlth carried a portable lamp in his knapsack, so one small part of the chamber was lit again. The interference that had been keeping the radios from working was also gone and Hank had let Nom Proo know they were safe.

“Destiny,” he replied to the irrationally angry young lady, “did you want me to allow those robots to carve you and the twins into spare parts and release Graloon out of the Jewels?”

“Well, no, but...” She sighed. “Where are the Jewels?”

Hank pointed with his flashlight. “Over there. Do not touch the Jewels.”

“I won’t. And I’m sorry, boss. I just...” She shrugged and turned away, walked to the generator and crouched behind it. After a minute, she stood up again and walked quietly back into the pool of light.

“They melted into dust,” she said quietly.

“So Graloon is gone for good.” He patted Destiny’s shoulder.

“Lass, don’t fret. You wanted to find an historical treasure. What do you think all this around you represents?”

“Oh.” Destiny suddenly smiled. “Oh! I’m not thinking at all, am I? This base is an incredible find! It’ll be studied for years. Oh, Hank, aside from that, the Trade Federation will pay a finder’s fee, I’m sure. You will get some profit out of this.”

Hank had a depressing thought. "You get the credit for finding this place, Destiny. You got hold of the map and figured out how to trace the Guide Posts. This is probably your chance to get back into the archeology game." He half-smiled at her, a little ashamed that his reaction was a selfish one. "I guess we'll lose you from the *Mark Twain*."

"Wow." She thought about all this for a few minutes, then said "Boss, I don't know what to say. I don't know what will happen. You gave me a home when I had nothing and..." She paused and shrugged.

The twins exchanged glances and Matti said "We would miss you, Destiny."

"Oh, gee whiz." Hank could see she was struggling not to hug the Martians, whose culture frowned on physical displays of affection. "Guys, I... well, who knows what will happen. My past is still my past. I might be stuck with you no matter what."

"Well, let's not worry about that now," said Hank. "That allosaur outside was mostly biological and it's probably still alive and hunting for his dinner. Let's figure out how to get back to the ship without getting eaten. Then we can all make long-term plans."